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How U.S. Intelligence Shares Some Secrets Among Friends

By STEPHEN ENGELBERG

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AMONG all the furtive dealings of intelligence agencies, few are more secret than the sharing of information with other countries. For while such exchanges are essential to any intelligence service, their public disclosure could hopelessly complicate foreign policy questions.

So the denials were quick and firm last week when one of Washington's more touchy liaisons became the subject of public discussion.

Present and former Government officials said the United States, working closely with Britain, had supplied South Africa with intelligence on the banned and exiled African National Congress. The information was said to include specific warnings of attacks planned by the guerrilla group. In return, the officials said, South Africa reported on nearby Soviet and Cuban activities. It could not be learned whether the exchange was continuing.

Reagan Administration officials denied having provided the South Africans with any data on the A.N.C.

George P. Shultz, the Secretary of State, told a Congressional committee that the Director of Central Intelligence had assured him the United States had not given such information to South Africa.

The Administration statements were not surprising. No Government wants to discuss the secret information it shares with allies. In this case, moreover, the Reagan Administration has been considering the possibility of establishing contacts with the A.N.C. in an effort to bring pressure upon South Africa to end its policy of apartheid, and a public disclosure of the exchange with Pretoria would undoubtedly make any future dealings with the Congress more difficult.

Denials aside, the sharing of information is a way of life among intelligence agencies. Sometimes it happens in the field, in informal meetings between Central Intelligence Agency station chiefs and their colleagues from other countries. And sometimes it is handled in formal meetings and through permanent computer links, according to former intelligence officers. The exchanges are supposed to be authorized by headquarters, but the former officers acknowledge supervision can be loose.

On occasion, intelligence sharing can be used to further foreign policy goals. When Robert Hawke was elected Prime Minister of Australia in 1983, the Reagan Administration significantly enhanced the quality of the information being shared with the Australian Security Intelligence Organization, according to analysts in Washington. This was done to signal encouragement to the Labor Party government, which was viewed by some analysts as hostile to American interests.

The main force driving the worldwide information bazaar is the comparative wealth of data Washington gathers from a worldwide network of human and technical sources. Its satellites photograph the globe and its listening posts intercept communications around the world.

In exchange for a share of that network's output, other countries provide Washington with their own information. They may have been able to put interception equipment in places not accessible to the United States or develop sources not available to American intelligence.

But it is largely Washington that calls the shots. "The United States is obviously festooned with the best acquisition capability and huge budgets," said a former intelligence official. "Other countries are relatively impoverished. That is why we are in the driver's seat."

One of the best known information-sharing relationships involves the C.I.A. and Israeli intelligence. The Israelis provide extensive information on terrorist groups. In exchange, they are given some, but not all, of the related material gathered by American sources.

Clear limits are set. The Israelis, for instance, have long wanted their own "downlink" to American photo satellites. The United States refuses to allow such a connection, although satellite photos are routinely shared with Israel. Nor do the Israelis get raw decoded material from intercepted communications, which Washington prefers to keep closely guarded. And Israel is not given sensitive information on the moderate Arab countries with which the United States has military dealings.

That some measure of distrust apparently is part of America's liaison with Israel became embarrassingly public last year when the authorities arrested a Navy analyst and charged him with spying for Israel. The analyst, Jonathan Jay Pollard, pleaded guilty.

Administration officials speculate that he was recruited to obtain information the Israelis could not get through normal channels, in part to ascertain whether Washington was witholding any relevant items.